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# Water safe to drink, but lake bottom polluted

By KATHLEEN McLAUGHLIN  
News staff

**BEVERLY** — While the water remains safe to drink, scientists found enough toxins in sediment at the bottom of Wenham Lake that they need to measure the risk to people and wildlife.

State environmental officials and citizens from Beverly and Salem, who use the water supply, received the results of a state-required study yesterday.

Wenham Lake Watershed Association president Jan Schlichtmann said officials shouldn't downplay surrounding contamination, even if the water is safe.

"We have this toxic liner to our water supply," said Schlichtmann, whose group has been monitoring the lake and the water board's practices.

Officials didn't dispute that characterization, but took pains to point out that it's not yet clear whether people could get sick from contact with sediment from the treatment process. The silt built up for decades in lagoons along the southern edge of the lake.

Under orders from the state, consultants for the Salem-Beverly Water Supply Board sampled sediment and water this past summer, and they say the main toxin is arsenic, a heavy metal that is a common environmental problem.

Arsenic isn't water soluble, so even if it stays in the lake bed, the

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cleanliness of the water supply won't change, said Larry Himeline of Stearns & Wheeler, which conducted the study.

A subcontractor will do the risk assessment, which is a number-crunching job to determine the risk of worst-case scenarios, but

one hasn't been chosen.

The state Department of Environmental Protection sees the lake bed and a marsh near the treatment plant as a contaminated cleanup site.

The source of contamination is the water-purification process itself. Backwash from water filters was deposited in lagoons over the decades, starting in 1935. Lagoon silt was also diluted with sand and used as fill at the North Beverly Cemetery, the water supply canal

road, Putnamville Reservoir dikes and the Memorial Middle School athletic fields.

"It wouldn't be legal or allowed for a wetland to be filled with that today," said Dick Chalpin, regional engineer for the DEP.

The investigation started last year, after the Wenham Lake activists found ash from the Vitale site on the north side of the lake. The ash, left over from the Salem power plant, eroded down a brook from an old quarry, where its buried on Beverly airport land.

Ash is typically laden with ar-

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## Lake: Contaminants found in sediment

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senic, and based on the results of water samples, the DEP ordered an investigation.

Arsenic levels for treated and untreated water came in at 2 parts per billion and 1 part per billion, well below the new U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standard of 10 parts per billion.

What Stearns & Wheler found in treatment sediment near the lake this summer, however, was much more concentrated.

"We did have elevated levels of arsenic," Hineline said.

Metals in the sediment from backwash, or residuals, are more concentrated because of the chemicals used in treatment, including a coagulant that contains aluminum.

The state doesn't regulate sediment as it does regular soil and water, but the consultants adopted the standard for soil, 30 parts per million, in deciding what's "ele-

The public will have a chance to comment on the study during a meeting of the water board, 7 p.m. Jan. 23 at the treatment plant on Arlington Road.

vated." Two samples from the marsh exceeded that standard by at least 9 parts per million, and one sample from the lake bed near an outfall pipe was 59.8 parts per million.

The water board isn't ready to say whether the marsh or lake bed pose a threat to human health, partly because the public isn't supposed to have access to those areas. "You're walking through the wilderness to get into the marsh area," Hineline said.

Although not allowed, fishing from Wenham Lake is common, and the activists pressed officials to let people know why they shouldn't

trespass. And someone swimming in the lake, stirring up sediment, could easily take in a mouthful, Schlichtmann said.

Chalpin agreed that it might be wise to post signs at certain points. "There's no harm in doing whatever we can to protect that person who may be trespassing."

The other risk is ecological, Chalpin said. Even if the risks are high, the marsh and lake bed won't necessarily be cleaned up.

Arsenic turns up in seemingly pristine places all the time at levels of 100 to 200 parts per million, Chalpin said, especially because it was a commonly used pesticide. Sometimes if the contaminated soil is deep enough, it's simply left alone, and a restriction is placed on the property.

That would be the least the water board could do, if it doesn't clean up the contaminated sediment, Chalpin said.